

NON-HOUND HUNTER FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

DECEMBER 10, 2007; RICHMOND, VA

GROUP PROFILE

The Non-hound Hunter focus group was held on December 10, 2007 in Richmond, VA, as part of a larger effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately 32 non-hound hunters were invited to attend the focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in the hunting community. Eighteen non-hound hunters were attended this focus group meeting; 17 participants were white males, one was an American Indian male.

After a brief introduction to the Hunting with Hounds Study, participants were asked to introduce themselves and provide a brief description of the types of hunting they participate in. All participants identified themselves as avid hunters, passionate about their sport. All participated in several types of hunting including shotgun, rifle, and bow hunting. All had hunted a variety of game in Virginia and several had hunted for exotic and trophy wildlife in other states and countries. One participant indicated that he primarily hunts for upland game birds with English setters. Some other participants had occasionally or previously participated in hound hunting. Several participants indicated that they owned farm land and some indicated that they are involved in the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). One participant indicated that he lives on a tribal reservation where he also hunts for deer.

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

The focus group was conducted for approximately two hours. During that time, participants responded to a series of questions posed by the facilitator (in bold, below). A summary of responses is provided below, including direct quotes from meeting participants that help to illustrate any common themes or key points from the discussion.

How important is hunting for you compared to other types of recreation that you and your family take part in?

All participants indicated that hunting was very important to them. Several participants indicated that hunting was so important to them that they purchased or manage property expressly for that purpose. Participants also indicated that hunting is an important cultural and family tradition for them.

“My wife actually hunts with me some so it’s pretty important, ‘cause we hunt together. I have youth from the church I take hunting; my brother and his son. It’s a big family ordeal and it is extremely important.”

“I only work for one reason, and that’s to hunt. I hunt twelve months out of the year...hunting is my life.”

“I enjoy it. It’s a cultural tradition for my tribe. Hunting on land that my ancestors hunted on for thousands of years.”

“I love to hunt. It’s important enough that I went and invested in a piece of property. I went and bought this farm. If I wasn’t a hunter, I certainly wouldn’t have done that.”

What do you believe to be the most important issues facing hunters today?

Participants listed several issues as being important to hunters including the need to reduce conflicts between deer hound and non-hound hunters related to disrupting still hunts, running hounds hunting out of season, and hounds running on posted property. Most participants felt that the problems they were experiencing were “people problems” and indicated that poor sportsmanship and unethical practices by some hunters are behind the issues. Some participants indicated that different laws, regulations, or fines were needed to address issues related to hound hunting and some mentioned that they favored those adopted in other southeastern states. Many participants indicated their support for hound hunting as a practice and as a way to manage deer populations, but most participants also indicated that aspects of hound hunting need to change.

“I say people are the problem. The dog’s not the problem. The dog’s going wherever the quarry leads him. People are the problem.”

“The biggest concern about dog hunters is what they’re doing to the sport of hunting with non-hunters and property owners who don’t hunt, but don’t close their property to hunting yet. I’ve had a number of property owners in the area where I lease, in Nelson County, say this is the last year. I can’t let anybody hunt because then it opens the door to the dog hunters.”

“I’m not against people hunting with dogs. I just think that the property owners, whether they hunt or whether they don’t hunt need to be protected from people that just walk onto your property under the guise of just looking for their dog.”

“I love the fact that these other states are mandating they have to have a certain amount of continuous acres to be able to turn a dog loose.”

“Guy on the other side of the river leaves his hounds out all year long and I’m getting tired of breaking up chases on spotted fawns in July and August.”

“I pretty much got fed up with the situation in Virginia and pretty much exclusively hunt my farm in North Carolina now.”

“I hear you guys. Everybody here, pretty much, is a farmer. I shot 37 deer this spring at night spotlighting with a rifle. I have that kind of problem. I can’t afford not to have hound hunters hunting because I won’t have a crop.”

How do you think that issues surrounding hunting with hounds affect you as a non-hound hunter?

Participants felt that hound hunting issues, because they are more visible, have greater potential to give all hunters a bad name. In addition, participants believe that hunters who are also landowners are less organized and less able to work in a political decision-making system.

“The hound hunters, for bears and deer....Us landowners, we don’t organize. We expect you guys with the state to run interference for us and protect our rights. And that’s why we drove a long way, a lot of us, to get here.”

“Public appearance from the landowner or people that move into the state and aren’t familiar with [hunting], they don’t see the still hunters. Because we go in and we park and we go in the woods and we still hunt and we come out. They don’t see that. What they see is them coming out of their subdivision and 8 or 10 trucks on the side of the road with men with orange hats and guns in their hands and they feel threatened. They don’t see dog hunters—they see hunters.”

In the areas where you hunt, have you seen any changes over the last 10 years in hunting with hounds? If you have, were they related to changes in land ownership, changes in attitudes of land owners, changes in hunter interests, or other factors?

Participants acknowledged that the landscape in Virginia has changed. They noted that land is being subdivided and that people are moving in who are not familiar with rural cultural traditions, including hunting and hound hunting. Participants indicated that there are fewer hunters today. They also noted that laws are variable from county to county and suggested that statewide laws to regulate hunting are needed.

“The state of Virginia is not like it was 40 years ago. We all know that. There are people moving in. Where there used to be farms, now there are subdivisions. These people that come moved in here, they don’t know anything about hunting.”

“We’re losing hunters in the state and we’re getting a lot of new residents moving here.”

“Every county has different rules and different laws...the state of Virginia should have a state law that covers all counties [about hunting from the road].”

Have you or your hunting partners experienced any conflicts with hunters who use hounds? What was the nature of the conflict? Was it resolved? How?

Participants indicated that they had had been involved in conflicts with hunters who use hounds over issues such as vehicles in the road, turning dogs loose on posted property, property vandalism, damage to gates, and disruption of still hunts. Participants indicated that they have called game wardens to help resolve conflicts. One participant indicated that he has used recording devices to document conflicts. Another participant felt that the only recourse for some issues was in the legislature.

“I had a confrontation with 7 armed men who would not move out of a public road because they were waiting for the dogs. They didn’t have permission to hunt on either side of the road, so they’re in the road—it’s a county road—and they took offense because I wanted to get past.”

“The hunt club that was hunting in my area got mad. They pulled my gates up. They dumped 2 week old fish in my drive way; that didn’t get me. One morning my wife leaves with my 2 year old daughter in her car to go to work and she calls me on the cell phone says my transmissions going out...they had lined my driveway with big, fat roofing tacks.”

“There is power in voices and power in people....The only way we’ll solve any of these problems is through...legislation.”

“I’ve called the game warden, you know, he’s so swamped he can’t get there. So, I’ve been calling the sheriff.”

“I’m constantly having youth hunts....that’s how I solve my doe problem. Saturday I had a youth hunt up there....You know the kids going to kill a deer, it a slam-dunk, automatic thing. And then, Saturday morning, the guy dumps his dogs on me and I’m telling you, it was over for the day. Ruined the hunt for all those kids.”

“We’re not anti-dogs. We love them. The condition they get in is horrible....I just found out that some of these people are buying their dogs just before the season, run them, and then cut them loose in the woods. Take their collars off and turn them loose in the woods so they don’t have to pay vet bills. We had a couple...that we found and they were so emaciated that it was cryable to look at the dog.”

Participants also indicated that they have had positive interactions with hound hunters, including hound hunters who work to keep dogs off of posted property, rabbit hunters, and some hound hunters who behave well.

“I’ve got a gentleman north of me...that man runs his dogs and does a beautiful job, he works at keeping them off my place, he really does.”

“I have favorable conversations with rabbit hunters all the time. I tell them where the rabbits are, they tell me where the quail are. They keep their dogs together.”

“I have a neighbor out there...her husband just passed away. They were big farmers. She moved into town....The local hunt club did come out and pack her all up and move her in. It was a big thing in the local paper.”

“There are a whole lot of people who hunt with dogs who you never see. This weekend...we had a management hunt, we ran dogs through cutover that I couldn’t walk through it. It’s a matter of how you hunt with hounds.”

Are there certain areas where you think that hunting with hounds is inappropriate? Where is it appropriate?

Participants felt that small acreage tracts and places where hunting would be a disturbance to others because they are highly populated areas would be inappropriate for hunting, including hunting with hounds. Participants also indicated that they disapproved of hounds running on posted property.

“There are places in Virginia where it’s inappropriate to hunt. Because you are creating a threat, or you’re interfering with other people’s rights to peace and quiet.”

“You can’t keep dogs on 5 acres.”

“If I were to take 25 or 30 cows and run them across [his] farm every week, he’d probably have me locked up. It also goes to a liability standpoint....There’s got to be some change.”

Some hunting groups (e.g. bow hunters) have developed education and ethics programs that amount to a set of “best practices”. Do you think that is something that other hunters, including those who use hounds, should do?

Participants were skeptical about the effectiveness of ethics programs. Some participants had tried to develop local ethics programs and felt they were not well adopted by hound hunters. Some participants suggested that there are too many clubs, especially small or “gypsy” clubs, to reach with an ethics programs. Others suggested that even good ethics applied to areas too small to hold dogs will not work.

“We tried that. In [my] county, there is a hunter advisory group....We came up with a list of ethics and we went around to each hound club and met with them, one-on-one, and gave them a code of ethics. We talked to them about not riding around with deer on the dog box because it turns people off, not lining the roads because it doesn’t look good for hunters, we talked to them also about...my club adopts a highway. We pick up the trash for a mile on each side. We talked to them about that. And the guy said, ‘I don’t pick up my trash, why would I pick up someone else’s trash?’”

“You got so many clubs, too, small clubs. They’re the ones that I think, in our area, gives me problems. The small clubs.”

“Right now, nobody’s got responsibility out there...”

“Once he turns that dog loose, he can’t control it. Even if he’s trying to turn loose on 100 acres where he has permission to hunt. In 10 minutes time, he’s going to trail over here on my property. He was trying to do the right thing, but still his dog comes over on my property.”

Are there any other important questions that this group should discuss?

Some participants commented that hound hunting takes up valuable time for law enforcement. Others mentioned that landowners and non-hunters are watching the project very closely. Another participant suggested that far-ranging dogs should not be allowed on public land. There were a few questions about the public input process timeline—when would focus group meetings be finished and when would summaries of the meetings be out. Virginia Tech facilitators answered these questions. One participant asked if the facilitators had heard anything new tonight. Virginia Tech facilitators indicated that the meeting was helpful for deepening their understanding of some issues related to hunting with hounds. Virginia Tech facilitators spent some time explaining other aspects of the public input process and the timeline.

SUMMARY

Although non-hound hunters were invited to attend this focus group meeting, many of the participants were also landowners and both of these perspectives were presented. Overall, participants in this focus group meeting supported hound hunting, but were concerned about private property rights, including the fairness of the right to retrieve law, use of loopholes in existing laws that allow hound hunting/chase out of season, road hunting, and other issues. Members of this focus group recounted having experienced a number of conflicts with hound hunters ranging from property damage, to hunt interference, to blocked roads. Consistently, this group suggested the need for regulations that only allow hound hunting on large acre parcels, the need to increase accountability of hound hunters, and the need for non-hound hunting interests to become better organized in order to play a more significant role in the decision-making process. Participants were especially concerned about the image that visible hound hunters are portraying for other hunters, especially with landowners who are increasingly denying permission to hunt due to unethical behavior on the part of some hound hunters. In general, participants from this group want to see hound hunting continue in the state, but also want issues addressed to better the image of hunting in general and reduce conflicts between hound hunters and other hunters and landowners.